AMERICA'S BROKEN MAINSPRING by Adlai E. Stevenson The Progressive, Madison, Wisconsin March 1959

The article belwo represents, in our judgment, the ablest and most compelling examination of the collective conscience of America - and the most cogent analysis of the contrasting moods of the United States and the Soviet Union - that we have read in a long time. It is adapted from Mr. Stevenson's recent A. Powell Davies Memorial Lecture in Washington, D.C. - The Editors.

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All politics is made up of many things - economic pressures, personal ambitions, the desire to exercise power, the overriding issues of national need and aspiration. But if it is nothing more, it is without roots. It is built on shifting, changing sands of emotion and interest. When challenged, it can give no account of itself. When threatened, it is in danger of collapse.

Today, when the threat and challenge to a free society seems more total and more powerful than ever before, it is not a political luxury or fruitless pedantry to re-examine our fundamental principles. I think it more likely to be the condition of survival.

There is a phrase of the late A. Powell Davies' that stays in my mind. I do not know when I have heard a more terse and pregnant summing up of our predicament. "The world," he said, "is now too dangerous for anything but the truth, too small for anything but brotherhood." This I believe to be in broad measure a correct estimate of the condition of human society, which is now capable, with a few hydrogen bombs, of extinguishing itself. Today we can all be killed by the same bombs or atomic fallout. In that sense we have a desperate physical solidarity. But moral and social solidarity in the family of man is still to be found.

Not so long ago I visited Dr. Albert Schweitzer in his primitive jungle hospital in French Equatorial Africa, and he told me he considered this the most dangerous period in history, not just modern history, but all human history. Why? Because, he said, heretofore nature had controlled man, but now man has learned to control elemental forces - before he has learned to control himself.

Many of us seem to rely on some mythical God-given superiority of the white Western world to save us. And my concern is that the evidence is there that the communists accept the reality of the human condition more than we do.

It is impossible to spend weeks traveling around the Soviet Union as I did last summer without taking away an overwhelming impression of thrust and purpose in most aspects of Soviet life. The revolutionary ardor has cooled with time, but even the very pragmatic political leaders seem to believe profoundly in the truth of their way of life, and they are quietly confident that it will sweep the world in time. I think they sincerely believe that their methods, their aspirations, their dreams, make up the final truth about the nature of man and society; that collective man in the collective state is the ultimate unfolding of human destiny, the end of history, the "farr off divine event" for which mankind has been in long travail, the vision of "all things made new" that has haunted men's minds ever since Christianity thrust into human thought the intoxicating ideal of a perfected humanity.

From this conviction, if I have not overstated it, flow two consequences. The first is that no effort, no dedication, no sacrifice is too great that may helpt to realize the Communist Party's goals in a Soviet society. The second is that no corner of humanity can be a matter of indifference to the Communists because the whole human race is destined to become one communist brotherhood.

These are not abstract generalizations. Russia is a vast powerhouse of energy harnessed to the communal task of building the Soviet dream. The thrust of economic growth which adds a nine or ten percent increase each year to industrial expansion is one aspect of this energy. The vast sums available for science and research are another. The self-discipline and long hours put in by school children to train themselves to be scientists, technicians, administrators, linguists of the new world order are perhaps the most significant measure of the resources of energy, work and skill upon which the Soviet leaders hope to draw.

The energy, the drive, the dedication in the USSR spill over into international affairs. In part, of course, this is the restless concern which all imperial powers must exercise, especially when the peoples they control are as restive and unreliable as the captive peoples in Russia's European empire. But Communist activity, planning and efforts in trade and aid are not confined to areas of Communist control. They are worldwide, and there is no corner of the earth's surface which they think too insignificant for their attention. While trade missions are busy in Latin America trading Soviet machinery and oil for coffee and wool, academic representatives are touring West Africa, Arab and Asian students are being trained in Moscow, technical advisers dispatched to India and Burma and Indonesia, and the glossy flood of propaganda depicting the Soviet millenium of bumper harvests and happy workers is pumped out all round the world.

All this we know - or begin to know. But I wonder how often we try to grasp the scale of dedication

that lies behind it. Why should they be so busy? Why so much work and thought? Why such diversion of resources? Why such patience through every setback, such forward thrusts through every point of Western weakness? Heaven knows, we only want to stay home. Why don't they? Why do we never meet an isolationist Communist? These are the questions that haunted me while I confronted at first hand this iron, forceful, and formidable way of life.

And I don't think there is any doubt about the answer. Part of it is simply needed foreign trade. Part is fear, the search for security through friends. And part is the historical centrifugal forces in Russia that have been pressing outward for a hundred years - to the Pacific, the Balkans and the Middle East. But the important thing is that the Soviet Russians believe in their truth, as the men of the Western world once believed in theirs. They, not we, are firing the shots that are heard round the world - and also the satellites that orbit above it. The fact that their faith is in many ways an evil perversion of the great propositions that once made the blood course in our Western veins does not alter the fact that their tempo is dynamic and ours sluggish - even, I think, to ourselves.

The reason cannot be that we Americans have lost our vision of truth and brotherhood, No country on earth owes the sense of community more explicitly to the fact that it is united not by race or nationality but by fidelity to an idea. We were born "dedicated to a proposition" and our greatest leaders - the Jeffersons, the Lincolns, the Woodrow Wilsons - were not great because they achieved purely American purposes, but because they were able to speak for humanity at large and extend their vision to the whole family of man.

Nor, I believe, can we find fault with the American dream. Its truths are still "self-evident." The possession of liberty and the pursuit of happiness - rightly understood - have not been overthrown as the highest goods of human society. Indeed the ferment of our freedom works inexplorably and dangerously in the Communist world. No one can have visited Poland without seeing how little the Polish people accept their servitude and how they look beyond their neighbors to the free world as the reservoir of power and hope.

But alas, on the basis of the record, one would hardly suspect that the Western world possessed so powerful a weapon. All our talk - in diplomacy, in strategy, in aid and trade, in all the intricacies of our worldwide relations - has been to a depressing degree purely defensive. We have offered aid not to help others but to shield ourselves. We have reacted to countless Soviet initiatives; acted on our own initiative barely at all. We watch the skies for other peoples' sputniks and listen to the telegraph wires for other people's moves. Yet we are the free men of this universe, the children of liberty, the beneficiaries of unequalled abundance, and heirs of the highest, produest political tradition ever known to man!

Why this lack of initiative? Why this paralysis of the will? What have we done to our truth and our brotherhood - the supreme truth of freedom, the Christian truth of brotherly love? Have they failed? Or have we?

There is no more urgent duty than to discover why we have failed and to get back into the arena, aspiring, striving, fighting once more for what we believe. An examination of what you might call our collective conscience is to my mind far more important than particular projects or programs. You can have a perfect assembly of pieces for your watch, but they are worthless if the mainspring is broken. I am not basically worried about our various pieces - our technology, our science, our machines, our resources. But I am concerned, desperately concerned, about our mainspring. That it has run down, we know. But is it broken beyond repair? In the last analysis, no question is worth more consideration in America today.

I would like to suggest some of the ways it seems to me we have enfeebled the great central pulse of our freedom, the great truth of liberty, which, more than any other nation, we first set working in the modern world.

Goethe, who also lived through a crisis of freedom, said to his generation: "What you have inherited from your fathers, earn over again for yourselves, or it will not be yours." We inherited freedom. We seem unaware that it has to be remade and re-earned in each generation of man. One reason for this failure is, I believe, passing at last. In recent years we were stifled with complacent self-confidence. We believed ourselves dominant in every field. We talked of "the American Century". We forgot the ardors and efforts that had given us a measure of pre-eminence. Complacency made us impervious to ideas, even the obvious idea that we were in danger. So we assumed that all we needed was to sit still and enjoy the "peace and prosperity" that was our right.

I believe that phase is passing. Our foolish languor has been shaken, if not shattered. We are more ready to examine ourselves and our record. And it is a privilege of our society that every citizen should make his own inquiry. The urgent thing is to feel the need for re-thinking and to set to work the ultimate energies of free society - which cannot be done by the fiat of government but only by the troubled conscience of responsible men and women.

It is simply as a citizen as concerned as you are that I want to suggest what seems to me to be the obstacles to a full understanding of our great mission in this time of testing.

I believe that we have confused the free with the free and easy. If freedom had been the happy, simple, relaxed state of ordinary humanity, man would have everywhere been free - whereas through most of time and space he has been in chains. Do not let us make any mistake about this. Tyranny is the normal pattern of government. It is only by intense thought, by great effort, by burning idealism and unlimited sacrifice that freedom has prevailed as a system of government. And the efforts which were first necessary to create it are fully as necessary to sustain it in our own day.

He who offers this thing we call freedom as the soft option is a deceiver or himself decèived. He who sells it cheap or offers it as the byproduct of this or that economic system is a knave or foo For freedom demands infinitely more care and devotion than any other political system. It puts consent and personal initiative in the place of command and obedience. By relying upon the devotio and initiative of ordinary citizens, it gives up the harsh but effective disciplines that underpin all the tyrannies which over the millenia have stunted the full stature of men.

But of what use is escape from external restraint if given the opportunity men simply stunt themselves? If freedom means ease alone, if it means shirking the hard disciplines of learning, if it means evading the rigors and rewards of creative activity, if it means more expenditure on advertising than education, if it means "bachelor cooking" and "life adjustment" courses in the schools, and the steady cult of the trivial and mediocre, if it means - worst of all - indifference or even contempt for all but athletic excellence, we may keep for a time the forms of free society, but its spirit will be dead.

I believe we have had enough of adjustment, conformity, ea y options, and the least common denominator in our system. We need instead to see the "pursuit of happiness" in terms which are historically proven and psychologically correct. The dreary failure in history of all classes committed to pleasure and profit alone, the vacuity and misery accompanying the sole pursuit of ease - the collapse of the French aristocracy, the corruption of imperial Rome, the decline and fall of the resplendent Manchus - all these facts in history do not lose their point because the pleasures of today are mass pleasures and no longer the enjoyments of an elite. If we become a nation of Bourbons, numbers won't save us. We shall go their way. Vacuity and indifference are not redeemed by the fact that everyone can share in them. They merely restrict the circle from which regeneration can come.

I say this in no Puritan or pleasure-hating spirit. On the contrary, there is no boredom or miser to equal the pursuit of distraction alone. We do not slip into happiness. It is strenuously sought and earned. A nation glued to the television screen is not simply at a loss before the iron pionee of the new collective society; it isn't even having a good time. No society has ever spent as muc as we do on drink and tranquilizers. Can one argue that this is evidence of universal fun?

Perhaps this misunderstanding of the true nature of happiness and of the conditions of its pursuit is simply an aspect of something else - <u>our misunderstanding of the real nature of freedom</u>. I reca the words of the wise Judge Learned Hand, who warned us that freedom would not survive in our Constitution of it had already died in the hearts of the people. <u>We shall not have a free society unless we have free men</u>.

How often do we reflect upon what this inner freedom entails? "Give me the man," cries Hamlet, "wh is not passion's slave." But this is what we are in danger of becoming, slaves to a tyranny more intimate and inescapable than any Stalin or Mao Tse-tung could impose. We can be made slaves simpl by the clutter and complexity of modern living - which notoriously leaves no time for serious thou and offers every means of distraction so that we can avoid such thought. Between aircraft that tak us everywhere more rapidly, newspapers that grow in weight and coverage, news that flashes around the globe, ceaseless and competitive entertainment, fashions that change from sack to trapeze and back again, we can fill up every "unforgiving minute" with enough trash and procuupation to still forever the deeper voices of the soul. Like Matthew Arnold, we can "... see all sights from pole t pole, And glance and nod and bustle by, And never once possess our soul, Before we die."

How are we to defend freedom if for the tyranny of external control we substitute the clattering, clutterin, tyranny of internal aimlessness and fuss? This freedom of our souls, freedom at the profoundest level of our being, is not a gift to us by our contemporary way of life. On the contra much of this life is a direct conspiracy against it. And if we cannot, by a certain discipline, by readiness for reflection and quiet, by determination to do the difficult and aim at a lasting good rediscover the real purpose and direction of our existence, we shall not be free. Our society will not be free. And between a chaotic, selfish, indifferent commercial society and the iron discipline of the Communist world, I would not like to predict the outcome. Outer tyranny with purpose may wel triumph over the inner, purposeless tyranny of a confused and aimless way of life.

I doubt if any society in history has faced so great a moral challenge as ours, or needed more desperately to draw on the deepest source of courage and responsibility. Ours is the first human community in which resources are so abundant that almost no policies lie beyond our capacity for purely physical reasons. What we decide to do, we can do. The inhibitions of poverty - lack of resources, lack of capital, lack of power - do not hold us back. We can accomplish what we aim at.

Thus, perhaps for the first time in the world, choice, not means, ends, nor instruments, are decisive.

Then again we have proved - drably and dangerously - over the last decade that defensiveness is not a sufficient reason for action. All the policies we have pursued in self-defense have left us still on the defensive. But if we do not act from fear, we must find some other motivation. In free society there is no other alternative but to tap the vigor, faith and imagination of the people themselves. We must find out once more who we are, as the psychologists say.

But perhaps the most urgent reason why the quality of our moral response has become the decisive issue in politics is quite simply that most of the major problems of our day present themselves in moral terms and are probably insoluble without some stirring of generosity, some measure of vision. Let me give you three instances:

1) In the wealthiest nation in the world, at least five million families still live in squalid but remediable poverty. They are a minority. They don't have the votes to force the issue of their misfortune into the front rank of public issues. They depend, for remedies, upon the alert conscience of the majority. But how do we keep the conscience sensitive and alert? By concentrating on our own concerns and adding the dishwasher to the television set to the air conditioner? By griping over taxes and attacking that great bogey we call "the welfare state"? By closing our eyes every time our shiny car takes us through a slum? No - we shall have the dedication and drive to wipe poverty out of this richland only if the well-to-do majority of today do not repeat the selfish indifference which, in many communities, has been the epitaph of yesterday's wealthy elite.

2) Take the issue of the rights and status of our colored citizens. This is our small share of a world-wide problem. The four hundred years' dominance of men of white skin is ending. The vast colored majority of mankind are seeking the opportunity and the respect which white people have been lucky enough to enjoy for so long - sometimes at the colored peoples' expense. But, within this world-wide crisis, we in America, with our colored minority, have a major role to play, for good or evil. "The unfinished work" which Lincoln left us, of creating a society in which all men can hold up their heads as equals and self-respecting citizens, can never be accomplished unless there are enough white men and women who resist in the core of their being the moral evil of treating any of God's children as essentially inferior.

3) Nor is this simply a question of our own national community. I come back to the painful fact that the Communists show a world-wide concern which is largely lacking among the men of the West. The whole human race is their horizon. Their "brotherhood" is materialist, collectivist, atheist, and we dislike it, but it embraces everybody, and it is the framework of policies which take the missionaries of their new order to the ends of the earth. We have no corresponding commitment to our fellowmen. For hundreds of years, we have preached the Christian promise of brotherhood, but today, when vanishing space and scientific revolution have turned our planet into a single neighborhood, the ideal means little in terms of concern or conviction, in terms of policy or action.

   Here we are in the Atlantic world, 16 percent of the world's peoples consuming 70 percent of the world's wealth. We cannot be indifferent to the moral implications of this gap. I do not know how we can gain a new perspective about the narrow world of plenty and poverty in which we live unless moral insights of justice and compassion stir us to understand the privileged position in which we live.

We are not going to be stirred to action by our own needs. We are the cushioned, protected, fortunate minority. It is not the measure of our morals or the lesson of our history to be spurred on only by fear of Russian encroachments. What we have done has largely had this motivation, and it has left us on the defensive. Our hope is to accept the implications of our own faith, make concrete the image of brotherhood which we profess, and set to work to express our dedication in whatever effort or sacrifice the world's needs may dictate. And, if we must always think in terms of contest with the Soviets, the ability to create the good life for the greatest number will be decisive.

This age has been defined in many ways - as a time of conflict in ideology, as a period of revolution in science, as an era when at last the means lie at hand to free mankind from the ancient shackles of pain and hunger. It is all these things - but I believe that the true crisis of our time lies at a deeper level. We have indeed conquered means and resources unknown to earlier ages. We have had thrown open to us frontiers of choice which would leave earlier ages stupified by their scale and scope.

But all this freedom and elbow room only thrust onto us with more force the fundamental issue of the faith that is in us. We can use our wealth and our capacity for some vision of truth, some ideal of brotherhood, or we can imprison ourselves within the selfishness of our own concerns and the limitations of a narrow nationhood. This is the dimension of our crisis.

"You may argue that these qualities - of dedication and selflessness - are pretty remote from the realities of politics. They are all very well for private life, but what part can they play in the rough and tumble of partisanship, of primaries, conventions and election campaigns? Ambition, drive, material interests, political ~~xxxxx~~ skills, the art of manoeuver - all these, you say, have their part, but do not let us pretend that the democratic process is primarily a school of virtue or an arena of moral combat.

And yet, I wonder. It has been the view of great philosophers and great statesmen that our system of free government depends in the first instance upon the virtue of its citizens. Montesquieu made virtue the condition of republican government; Washington declared that it could not survive without it. We have had 175 years of it since their time, and no one can deny that the system had survived a remarkable amount of skulduggery. In fact, it is probably a tougher system than its founders imagined. Yet, I believe they are right. For no democratic system can survive without at least a large and active leaven of citizens in whom dedication and selflessness are not confined to private life but are the fundamental principles of their activity in the public sphere.

Naked interest and naked ambition will carry a lot of people naturally and inevitably into politics. We do not need societies for the promotion of lobbies. Interests, good and bad, will promote themselves. Nor, in any generation do we lack politicians whose only principle of action is the advancement of their own career - the starry-eyed opportunists and all the other eager men in a hurry to the top. But into what state must politics degenerate if that is all we find active in the political arena? That and sectional interest played upon by personal ambitions? There have been such periods - the roaring Nineties, the time from Harding to the Wall Street crash - but our democratic system survived because such epochs were followed and cleansed by periods of disinterested reform.

But there has never been any disinterested reform without disinterested reformers. And here we come to the essential contribution made by dedication and selflessness to the public good. No one ever did any good in politics without readiness for endless hard work - for the grinding, boring, tedious work, as well as the glamorous, high sounding, headline hitting work. The painstaking hours collecting the facts, the hours in committee and conference, the hours in persuasion and argument, the hours of defeat and disappointment, the hours of disgust and revulsion at the darker sides of human behaviour - these cannot be supported without energy and devotion. No reforms come easy; even the most obvious will have its entrenched enemies. Each one is carried to us on the bent and weary backs of patient, dedicated, men and women.

They are not only dedicated in their readiness to give energy and hard work to the cause; they must also have sufficiently clear sight and open minds and hearts to see the need for reform in the first place. But clear sight and an open heart for others' needs is again something that hardly "comes naturally." We have so many needs of our own - our families, our jobs, our homes, our fortunes, our proppects. We are hemmed in with needs and interests, weighty, urgent, honorable human needs and interests, even if they are exclusively our own. It takes an extra dimension of vision to see beyond our inner circle of interest. Most people, most of the time, do not possess it - which is one reason why self-regarding interests make up so much of the stuff of politics. And this, I suppose, is why the men and women of genuine, imperturbable public spirit seem so few and far between.

I sometimes think there is a danger of this element of vision vanishing almost wholly from our political life. In the main we are so comfortable; so many evils of the past have shrunk in size and almost out of sight. At the same time, people marry younger, have larger families, and are profoundly involved in earning a living, making careers and safeguarding the future of their children. It is more difficult, they say, to give time to public affairs when private life is so urgent and absorbing.

Yet is it, I wonder, more urgent and absorbing than a hundred years ago when young men not only married young, had large families and built up careers, but also opened up new frontiers, created new cities from the wilderness, and gave to new states and communities the framework of active political life?

If one reads the life of young Abe Lincoln, it is hard to believe that his struggles as a young lawyer and his difficulties as a parent were less than those of young men today. Yet there was no time when the deepest issues of the day did not occupy his mind or the call of statecraft make itself heard above the claims and clamor of everyday life. Nor was he alone or exceptional. Stephen A. Douglas' life was no different. The prairie towns were filled with earnest, active citizens, deeply, profoundly, concerned with the great issue of a nation "half-slave, half-free." When the multitudes gathered, a hundred years ago, to listen in rapt attention for hours to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, had they fewer responsibilities and duties than the citizens of today to many of whom the great issues of politics seem to be most usefully conveyed in a 15-second television flashes of subliminal advertising?

Is it not possible that the pressures of personal responsibilities are not greater but that the dedication and selflessness needed to discern and influence public issues have shrunk? In a century in which so many mentors of the public mind - from the psychiatrists to the ad-men - speak to us in terms of " what we owe to ourselves" may there not indeed have been a slackening of devotion compared with those days, not so long distant, when what man owes to God and his neighbor was a common theme of public discourse?

If so, t is is a dangerous hour for our politics and for government by consent of the governed. For at no time have so many of the great issues of the day demanded clear, real moral vision to bring them into focus.

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